Mr. Bush's War

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IT WAS CLEAR to most people a long time ago just from the April Glaspie episode that President Bush had missed an eleventh-hour opportunity to head off Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. But it took time and investigative labor to establish that his Baghdad ambassador's failure to warn Saddam Hussein was merely the tip of an iceberg of overall mindless encouragement of the Iraqi dictator. Much of this was obscured in the tributes Mr. Bush won for his actual conduct of the war and in the continuing postwar maneuvering. But the pre-war material has now been brought to a focus by Democratic vice presidential nominee Al Gore. His purpose is obviously political: to help in the election. His case is nonetheless devastating.

The United States had expedient reason to tilt to Iraq while it was fighting Iran in 1980-88. But the facts show that the Reagan and Bush administrations then failed to correct the tilt. Instead, the Bush team in particular set out to deal with Saddam Hussein in the name of moderating him. Repeatedly and right up to the last minute, it ignored official warnings that his American dealings were (1) serving his nuclear, chemical and other high-tech military programs and (2) even aiding him financially with diverted agricultural loans. Whether any officials involved in these transactions committed criminal violations remains to be seen. What is beyond doubt is that President Bush's policies helped build up Saddam Hussein and emboldened him. The gulf war, Sen. Gore fairly concludes, "should never have taken place." Because of misjudgment, the lives of hundreds of thousands of American servicemen were put on the line.

President Bush showed himself in these dealings the naive captive of a bizarre theory holding that the brutal, calculating, terroristic Saddam Hussein could be drawn into an orbit of American-guided moderation. When contrary information began piling up, he seems mostly to have ignored it. Nor can he contend, as he has regarding the Iran arms-for-hostages negotiations of the Reagan era, that he was "out of the loop." Even as vice president he was close to Iraq policy, and as president he was at its heart. The Democrats in attacking him on this issue are on the mark.